

My name is Franzi Dickson. I am currently a sophomore at Marin Academy in San Rafael. I attended Nueva from third grade through February of my seventh grade year. I found the situation in the middle school so horrific that I found it necessary to leave in the middle of the year.

The secrecy, stress, and cult-like atmosphere of the middle school affected everyone there, but, being a girl, I did not have to bear the brunt of Steve's anger. That was saved for the boys. I list only a few examples of which I have first-hand knowledge, but rest assured that many more unpleasant things happened during the six months I was there. I describe major incidents or topics below, but I think as important was the unremitting oppression of daily indignities, criticisms, slights, sarcasm, and Steve's deliberate toying with scapegoats and the unfavored. I always felt very sorry for the kids who were picked out and I wondered who would be next. And the pointless pressure never let up.

### The Sandwich Incident: Insensitivity and Bizarre Behavior

This incident happened during the annual trip to Ashland while we were at the ranch camp. Our entire class went on an afternoon hike one day. The idea was to reach the top of some particular hill, eat lunch, and hike back in time to put our packs away and freshen up before dinner. For lunch we had sandwiches. When we had each had one, people were allowed to go for seconds. It was announced that we were not to take any food that we could not finish ourselves because we hadn't brought enough sandwiches for everyone to have two. Some one took a second sandwich and, after taking only a single bite out of it, left it on [REDACTED]'s back pack. [REDACTED] was distraught, because he thought that Steve would think he had taken the sandwich and would make him eat it, or worse. When Steve discovered the insubordination, he became extremely annoyed. He gave us all a lecture, but said that if the culprit would confess privately to him on the hike back, that would be the end of the issue. Not surprisingly, the guilty party was not so eager to come forward.

When we got back, Steve was absolutely furious. He gave us another lecture and said that because no confession had been forthcoming, we were all responsible. He decreed that none of us was to have any dinner until someone admitted to eating the sandwich. I have been told that what followed was Josh's idea not Steve's. Never the less, several teachers, including Lee, were present.

We sat on the floor in two concentric circles, each with the same number of students. A person from the inside circle was paired with each person in the outside one. Each person looked into the eyes of their partner and said "I did not take the sandwich". Then the people in the outside circle would shift one to the left and the process would continue. We were forced to keep this up for what seemed like a very long time. No teachers intervened, even though we were delaying dinner and everyone was tired and hungry after spending the afternoon hiking. Some of the kids started to cry. I tried to cheer them up by saying "I deed not take zee sandveech" in a hick fake Transylvanian accent while making Dracula faces. I was promptly informed by a teacher that this was a serious effort and that I was to repeat the phrase in a normal voice. My French accent and "take me to your leader" alien voice were met with a similar lack of enthusiasm.



Despite the humor I found in the situation at the time, I now realize that it was extremely irresponsible for the teachers to allow this to go on, especially when it had some of the students in tears. This sort of bad judgment in a teacher is unforgivable!

We eventually switched to another activity. We walked around randomly mingling and talking in low voices. Eventually, a student called out that someone admitted to being the culprit. We were finally allowed to go to a very delayed dinner. The teachers said that it was all right if they didn't know who had done it as long as that person confessed to someone. I still do not understand the purpose of the rigmarole they put us through. The only thing I could think of was that they were trying to teach us a lesson in morals. The fact that Steve's faculty and he are united in forcing some very bizarre behavior on their students and that some of the students seem to buy into being Steve's favorites are among the reasons I consider the middle school to be strangely cult-like.

### The Survey: An Abuse of Power

Near the end of the time I was in the Middle School, Anabel conducted a survey to see how well students liked the middle school. This was because many of our parents had said at the annual class breakfast that their kids were stressed out, and the parents felt that students were being badly treated. She later used this survey in an attempt to prove that, aside from a few troublemakers, the students were happy. I think it is instructive to see how this anonymous, unbiased survey was conducted.

Each student in turn left class and went into Steve's office for a private talk with Anabel. We had no forewarning this was going to take place. When I went in, she asked me if I knew what the word humiliation means. Then she showed me a dictionary and asked me to read the definition of "humiliation". She asked if I had ever been humiliated or seen anyone else humiliated by the Middle School staff. Next she asked me questions off of the survey which was clipped to her clip board. I gave my answers and she wrote. I don't know what she wrote. I never got to read the survey. She may have written exactly what I said and no more, or she may have written something entirely different.

When we were finished with the questions, she had me rate various aspects of the school on a scale of one to ten. I rated most things threes or fours. Then she asked me to rate the middle school over all. I gave it a two, because I was afraid if I rated it any lower, she would disregard my comments as being too extreme. She proceeded to ask me how all of those threes and fours could average out to a two. I, a nervous seventh grader, was forced to defend my answer to the Principle of the school. We were told that Anabel was writing our answers down so that they would not be in our handwriting and would therefore be anonymous. I could perhaps ignore her blatant attempt to influence my answers if I thought that she had truly meant well. However, she made her true character abundantly clear when she later confronted my mother in a meeting of all the Middle School parents with the rating I had given the school.

Anabel, if you are reading this I have a few words especially for you. I truly enjoyed the Lit. Club you ran with ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~. It was one of the most pleasant, memorable experiences I had in grade school. Everyone in the group became so close that year. You were one of my biggest role models. I thought you were my friend. How could you abuse your power in such a disgusting manner?



## Academics

You call *this* an English program?

Both the tuition and the stress levels are extremely high in the Middle School. Some people believe that these drawbacks are made up for by the wonderful education their children will receive. I can personally attest to the fallacy of this belief.

The first six months of 7th grade, our writing assignments consisted of pages of introductory sentences, concluding sentences, metaphors, and similes. I do not know what happened in the last third of the year, but up until February, Steve had taught us nothing about how to turn these sentences into complete essays. His teaching was so unhelpful and confusing, that I was forced to get help from a tutor even while I attended the school. I spent eighth grade catching up so that I would be prepared for high school. Steve's own comments on my papers were often very poorly written. Students claim to have been taught to write well by Steve, that that is his one virtue. I submit that a lot of kids came into the Middle School already writing well. The Middle School trades on the accomplishments of the Lower School.

## Math

or

Which Class will Steve cancel first for a field trip to the make-up studio?

The math program was the one part of the curriculum I truly enjoyed. I took a geometry class from Jo [redacted] in 7th grade, which allowed me to enter high school at the Algebra II level. The teaching was excellent, the class tone respectful, the homework clear and reasonable. However, I felt that Steve did not consider it a particularly important subject. He canceled the class so often, that after [redacted] and I left the class (and finished the material privately with Jo by June), the rest of the class was unable to finish the course, even though they had been at the same point we were on March 1. They had to finish it throughout the 8th grade year, Jo told us, while taking algebra. Each student finished the material individually in bits and pieces, hardly an ideal way to do it.

## Science

The disrespectful attitude of Steve towards subjects other than what he was interested in extended to the science program, which I found to be fragmented and uninteresting, despite the marvelous classroom. The year's curriculum was designed to illustrate whatever Steve claimed would be happening in the humanities curriculum that week, which meant we jumped from topic to topic in a disjointed fashion, never following through on topics for the sake of the science. Also, since Steve didn't seem to have actually stuck to whatever he seemed to have told Lori about his curriculum, it didn't actually coordinate that well with his topics either.

We could have been doing fascinating labs involving chemistry or dissections, among other things. Instead, we did experiments where we dropped detergent into dishes full of food coloring. Molly did not subject us to this type of infantile experiment even when we were much younger. The science program in the third grade was more appropriate for seventh graders than what I experienced in the Middle School. With all of the concern lately over girls' lack of enthusiasm for math and science, I would think that these subjects would get more attention.



## Trimester Exams:

### Excessive stress

I have now been through three sets of high school finals in 1 1/2 years. I would like to contrast what I have experienced in high school with what I experienced at the Middle School.

At Marin Academy, we have a "Review Week," as most colleges do, during which all classes meet and there is ample time to review and ask questions. All teachers tell you what material you will be responsible for and, with the students, generate review materials. At Nueva, we had a 1/2 day review for all the many teachers and classes, fit around the intense drama rehearsal schedule for the play that was going to be put on soon after finals. (At Marin Academy, the many arts performances occur 1 to 1 1/2 months before the semester finals.). The review was hectic and pressured, with little time for any one teacher or subject. It should also be remembered that at this point, the Middle School students, almost all of whom had attended the Nueva Lower School, had very little experience with test-taking for class work, and in the Lower School, any test they had taken was spaced widely from any other test.

At Marin Academy, finals are spread over a week with a maximum of two exams per day and with a substantial lunch break between them. At Nueva we had all of our trimester exams in 1 1/2 days with five minute breaks in between. In the middle of written tests, everyone in the class was coming and going from the room to take four individual performing tests: Tai Chi, Japanese, Aerobics, and Jazz dance. This resulted in a very unsettled atmosphere, because you didn't know when you would be called out of the middle of one of your tests, and people around you were constantly getting up and sitting down. Did the staff actually want to know what we had learned, or did they just want to keep us in a hyperactive, hypertensive state? It is very hard to be jerked out of the middle of an essay or a geometry problem to demonstrate an aerobics routine and to then return to the classroom, get back to where you were, then start the process all over. (Don't forget the jazz dance and the Tai Chi).

In the middle of all this, there occurred the incident of [redacted] trying to comfort [redacted] which resulted in [redacted]'s test being thrown in the garbage in front of all of us. Also, during my oral Japanese test, Steve came in and started a major argument with the teacher. She hadn't finished testing me yet, and he told her she had much less time per student (I believe 5 minutes instead of 10) than she had been led to believe. She said she couldn't test the students that fast or redesign the test instantly. This soft-spoken woman from Japan, who was one of the few people in the Middle School who actually seemed to like us, was standing there angrily raising her voice to Steve and saying he was unreasonable, that he hadn't informed her ahead of time about this, and that he couldn't change the plan midstream! Needless to say, my test was summarily curtailed, and all thereafter were drastically shortened.

Last, why does Nueva Middle School have three sets of finals per year? The majority of high schools and colleges have two. The trimester system made for a very harried pace in the school year. And why do the play rehearsals jam in against the the exam period?

Even college students don't face such a stressful test situation and schedule. We were constantly told that getting into a good high school depended upon how we did on every assignment, every test; getting into a "good high school" seemed to be the one goal of middle school; and going to private school seemed to be the only thinkable future.

Middle school children, however smart, have their limits. Nueva's test schedule is both peculiar and unnecessary. It shows clearly the middle school administration's lack of understanding of the children they teach.



## The Arts: Mandatory Drama etc.

One of the things that particularly bothered me about the middle school curriculum was the mandatory drama class. As someone with "chronic stage fright," I can say that this was definitely not a pleasant experience. Every day we had to do a long series of improvisational exercises. I still am not interested in acting, but back then it was even worse. That is a hard age anyway. Everyone is just hitting puberty and has extremely low self-confidence. It is wonderful to have drama classes, but I do not believe that they should be mandatory. (Ironically, some of the students who were dying to be in the plays, weren't given parts in them or weren't allowed to participate at all.) If the middle school is going to be a performing arts school, then that should be made more clear to prospective students than it was to our class. We had a lot of students strongly oriented towards math and science in our class-- not surprising, given the long-time emphasis in the Lower School on those subjects.

I had benefitted greatly from the visual arts program in the Lower School. Today, I am taking visual arts classes every year at Marin Academy. We were led to believe when we signed up for the Middle School that we would have classes from a large number of visual arts specialists as well as the drama program. Our visual art specialists did not show up with any regularity. I only saw the drawing teacher once in November, for one wonderful drawing class that was never continued. Nueva has had many artistic students, and I feel that this lack of an identifiable art program is extremely insulting to us.

Some of the students in the Middle School had been involved in the music program in the Lower School. Those who attempted to keep up this involvement, either by trying to continue their private lessons or participating in the jazz band, either couldn't do it or faced Steve's wrath. The chorus we had, mostly for the purpose of the Vietnam play, was a joke. Steve wanted an untrained bunch of singers to sing a cappella, 4-part harmony with difficult melodies to embellish his play, without having led up to this feat with any systematic training. There was no Middle School music program.

## Self Science: The Vow of Silence

Yes, one might say, these complaints are all very well and good, but why didn't you bring them up while you attended Nueva? After all, the students have a forum to discuss their problems, the much lauded self science program. It could be more accurately described as the self SILENCE program. Many students in my self science class tried to talk about problems with teacher-student relations. I hope that by this time you can see why. One day someone made a disparaging comment about Steve. We all chimed in. One would think that on hearing this outburst, Janice Toben (our self science teacher) would have started a discussion on the subject. The concerns were obviously unanimous and exactly the sort of thing that the class should deal with. Naturally, this being Nueva, Janice was not willing to even discuss the subject. In her own words: "If you can't say anything nice about Steve, don't say anything at all."

I hope that what I have written can be of some use to future possible students of the Middle School and to those people trying to make it what we had thought it was.